



Prime Minister

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

This could become a very awkward issue - and could come up in the House at any time.

7 March, 1983

MS

*A. & C. 1/3
cc. Sir A. Parsons.*

MS

Dear John,

Possible Visit by Argentine Next-of-Kin

You asked for an account of the current position following recent telegrams and press reports, and advice on the line the Prime Minister might take in Parliament. The situation is not yet sufficiently clear for firm policy recommendations. Argentine intentions are obscure and careful thought is needed to ensure that our response to whatever is eventually proposed meets our interests.

The Argentine group now trying to set up a visit to the Falklands call themselves the 'Centre for Volunteers for the Fatherland'; they are described in the Argentine press as 'a group of ex-combatants of the Falklands War', though they also invite parents, wives and other relatives of Argentine servicemen buried in the Falklands to make contact with their head office. Again according to the press, they are 'requesting permission to return to the Islands' with the 'cooperation of the ICRC and the protection of the United Nations'. Their representative, Destefanis, has been in contact with the Argentine office of the ICRC, and has asked them to convey to us information about his proposed expedition. He said that it was humanitarian and non-political and that he intended to hire a boat and set sail from Montevideo (earlier reports said the ship would have a capacity of 60 at most and that the group intended the visit to take place in about 45 days' time ie at exactly the same time as our own next of kin visit). He denied any official links and told the ICRC that he had not informed the Argentine authorities of his plans. However we know that the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been enquiring about Destefanis' plans and that the Argentine Joint Chiefs of Staff are setting up a commission to deal with all those who wish to visit war graves in the Falklands. Destefanis has also been in direct contact with BISBA, two weeks ago, although he did not mention his intention to visit the islands. We know little of Destefanis,

*220.
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*Passage deleted and closed, 40 years, under FOI Exemption.
Wayland, 12 February 2013*

It is difficult to be sure from this what we are faced with. We certainly cannot exclude the participation of retired or serving military personnel, whose motives may be far from humanitarian. The 'Centre for Volunteers for the Fatherland' hardly inspire confidence as organisers. But it is not inconceivable that in the end the Argentines will propose a carefully-prepared group consisting of bona fide next-of-kin (though it would not be easy



to check). We might face an attempt to travel from Argentina to the Falklands in an Argentine vessel without requesting permission (they would automatically be turned back at the edge of the 150-mile FIPZ) or an independent group in an Argentine vessel might apply for permission. Equally, we might have to respond to a request for a visit by a group officially sponsored by the ICRC or conceivably by the Uruguayan Government.

In all this, we must take careful account of Islander opinion. Sir R Hunt's initial assessment is, not surprisingly, that the Islanders would be totally and unanimously opposed to an Argentine visit to Darwin in any circumstances. There would be strong public feelings here also, depending on what exactly is proposed. It is difficult to imagine circumstances in which an Argentine visit would seem appropriate for the foreseeable future, given the present Argentine attitude and bellicose statements.

On the other side, we must bear in mind the potential dangers to our own next-of-kin visit. The hyper-sensitive attitude of the Uruguayans has for some time been causing us concern, and the proposal's 45-day timing suggests that it could be a carefully-contrived ploy by Buenos Aires to embarrass the Uruguayans by putting them under pressure to be as helpful to Argentine next-of-kin as they are to British. The Ambassador in Montevideo advises that, unless we make an offer to accept a properly-organised Argentine next-of-kin visit, the Argentines are likely to use our attitude as a weapon to persuade the Uruguayans to withdraw their agreement to our visit. We must obviously guard against this.

As far as international opinion more generally is concerned, our treatment of the Argentine dead on the Falklands has shown up the Argentine Government's callous disregard for the norms of civilised behaviour. And we should be able to use this to good effect if we turn down an Argentine request. However, although the Geneva Conventions do not oblige us to permit a visit, we could forfeit some of our earlier credit if we seemed to be responding inflexibly to a genuine humanitarian proposal.

If Mrs Thatcher is asked about this while the position remains unclear, she could draw on the following:

(a) The Argentines have from the first treated their war dead with callous disregard. Before arranging for the reburial of the Argentine dead in the Islands in February, we repeatedly offered to return the bodies to Argentina if the Argentine Government so wished. This offer is still open.

(b) Any group of Argentines now wishing to visit the Falklands would have to have our permission. No request for permission has been received. If they try to enter the Protection Zone without, they will be dealt with appropriately.



(c) We are not impressed by what we read in press reports of the proposed composition of the Argentine group. A visit at the initiative of 'ex-combatants' is in no way comparable with our own next-of-kin visit.

(d) A request for a visit from a group with genuine humanitarian motives would be given careful consideration, but the Geneva Conventions do not oblige us to grant any Argentines permission to visit the cemetery at Darwin. We would obviously have to take into account also the Argentine refusal to declare a cessation of hostilities or begin to normalise relations.

Mr Pym has not seen this letter before its despatch, but I am submitting to him in parallel tonight. I am sending copies to Richard Mottram (MOD) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office)

Your ever

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes'.

(J E Holmes)
Private Secretary

A J Coles Esq
Private Secretary
No 10

HL

9 March 1983

Possible visit by Argentine next-of-kin

The Prime Minister has noted the contents of your letter of 7 March.

JOHN COLES

John Holmes, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

